

Routes of the Underground Railroad

Goal:

Students will map the routes of the Underground Railroad network, and learn about its secret code words and symbols.

Purpose:

Students become aware of how vast and complex the network of the Underground Railroad was, while gaining an understanding of the many variables involved in escape and how secrecy was maintained

Materials:

Physical and Political United States write-on, wipe-off desk maps (If these are not available to the teacher, outline maps can be used. Good basic, political outline maps of the United States can be found and printed at the following web site:

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=usofam&Rootmap=&Mode=b&SubMode=w>

Or the students could use political and physical maps from their atlases or textbooks, and use tracing paper to map their routes for this activity.

Handouts with actual Underground Railroad Routes. Some sample route maps can be found at the following web sites:

<http://www2.lhric.org/pocantico/tubman/map.htm>

<http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/travel/underground/routes.htm>

Standards Correlation:

Common Core State Standards Correlation :Common Core Standards for ELA and Common Core Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects

****Note:** Standards listed are extrapolated from Grades 9-10 CC History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects; the lessons can be adapted for grades 7-12, refer to corresponding standards for your particular grade level.

CCRST (9-10). 3 Follow precisely a complex multistep procedure when carrying out experiments, taking measurements, or performing technical tasks, attending to special cases or exceptions defined in the text.

CCSL (9-10).2 Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source.

Before the Lesson:

- Photocopy handouts of Underground Railroad Routes.
- Prepare physical and political United States desk maps (write-on/wipe-off or outline paper). Should have enough maps for student groups working in pairs or groups of three at the most.

Steps:

- 1) Engage: *From the beginning of slavery in the American South, fugitive slaves were escaping in order to gain their freedom. These fugitives used many different routes, and were often helped by people who wanted to end slavery. By the 1830s, this network of routes to freedom had become more organized and more extensive. Since it was very dangerous for anyone involved if they were caught, one way to keep this activity secret was to use code words for what they were doing so that others didn't know what they were talking about or referring to. The abolitionists were trying to help fugitive slaves to travel along safe routes to freedom. The people and the routes involved in this struggle for freedom became known as the **Underground Railroad**. Think of a railroad. What are some terms associated with a railroad?*

(Allow student responses and list some terms on the board.)

When abolitionists talked about passengers, they were referring to the fugitive slaves. When they talked about conductors, they were referring to the people who would lead the enslaved Africans to safety and freedom (there were conductors who were free Africans, whites, Native Americans, and former slaves). Stations were the safe houses where fugitives could stop, rest, and hide along the routes. Other railroad terms used as code included: depots, shareholders, superintendents, and agents.

(Students can brainstorm what they think these terms really referred to).

Abolitionists used the railroad as a metaphor (and a code) for how they were transporting fugitive slaves to freedom.

- 2) Mapping Activity: Distribute only the political maps to students working in pairs. First have them mark the Mason-Dixon Line (Explain, if necessary, that this line divided the North from the South. It forms the boundary line between Maryland, a slave state, and Pennsylvania, a free state.) Ask them to find and mark South Carolina on their map (or another southern state or city). What route do you think a fugitive slave might take to try to get to freedom? Discuss it with your partner and then mark it. Use the map scale to measure about how far the fugitive slave would have to travel to reach freedom. How long do you think this journey might take? Meet briefly with another team and share routes and rationale, and distances. (Remind students that because of the Fugitive Slave Laws, enslaved Africans were not truly free until they left the United States. However, many did end their journey in the “free” states, hoping to take on a new identity and avoid the slave catchers sent to retrieve them. Teams can decide where they want to end their fugitive’s journey).

Now hand out the physical maps, and again mark the Mason-Dixon Line and find and mark South Carolina. Ask students to compare and contrast this map with the other one that they just used: what new info is shown on this map that they didn’t have before? (mountains, swamps, etc.) Does that change their route choice? If so, map a new route. Share with another team.

Now hand out the Underground Railroad Route Map(s) and allow time for the teams to study the information. Ask them to compare and contrast their mapped routes to the actual routes known to have been used by fugitives on the Underground Railroad. Students should discuss: How are the routes similar? How are the routes different? When looking at the actual routes, what surprised you the most?

This journey wasn’t easy and it involved risks and consequences for all involved. Have a class discussion about difficult choices involved. (Discussion examples: The swamps and mountains are difficult terrain, but perhaps there is less chance of getting caught. Is the quickest route necessarily the safest? Is the most difficult and lengthy route necessarily a bad choice? Is it better to go by land or by a water route? Is it better to travel in mainly rural or urban settings? Should you try for Canada versus Mexico, or Florida and attempt to blend in with the Native Americans there?)

- 3) Closing: What do you think was the hardest choice that enslaved Africans trying to escape from slavery had to make? (Accept responses; most will probably emanate from the activity, but some may come from other activities or readings). If no one brings up the CHOICE to leave without one’s family, mention this choice. Many slaves had to escape on their own, or with only certain members of their families.

Only the strongest people would be able to make this kind of journey (as they have just seen through the mapping activity), so many were left behind. Many slaves escaped, but vowed to return for their families, or to work and save enough money to buy back their family members' freedom.

Evaluation:

- The mapping activity shows the routes to freedom that students chose. Teachers could more formally assess by asking students to explain (either verbally or in written form) why they chose the routes, or what changes they made after receiving the physical map, if any.
- Enslaved Africans often used the lyrics of songs to communicate information about the routes to freedom of the Underground Railroad (such as *Follow the Drinking Gourd*). Now that students have attempted to make this journey using the mapping activity, have them write the lyrics for a song that would help others to know details and tips about the best escape route from South Carolina. The students may enjoy this interesting web site about the meaning of the song *Follow the Drinking Gourd* from NASA:
<http://quest.arc.nasa.gov/lrc/special/mlk/gourd2.html>)

Extending and Enriching the Learning...

National Geographic has an excellent web simulation of the Underground Railroad that students can do independently.

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/railroad/index.html>

Underground Railroad Resources for Teachers

Print Resources

African Americans in Pennsylvania: Above Ground and Underground: An Illustrated Guide. Charles L. Blockson. (RB Books, 2001).

Bound for the North Star: True Stories of Fugitive Slaves. Dennis Brindell Fradin. (Houghton Mifflin, 2000).

Freedom Roads: Searching for the Underground Railroad. Joyce Hanson, Gary McGowan, & James Ransome. (Cricket Books, 2003).

Freedom Train: The Story of Harriet Tubman. Dorothy Sterling. (Scholastic, 1991).

North by Night: A Story of the Underground Railroad. Katherine Ayres. (Yearling Books, 2000).

Stealing South. Katherine Ayres. (Yearling Books, 2002).

The Underground Railroad. Bial, Raymond. (Houghton-Mifflin, 1999).

True North: A Novel of the Underground Railroad. Kathryn Lasky. (Scholastic, 1998).

Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania. William J. Switala. (Stackpole Books, 2001).

Web Resources

The National Park Service Underground Railroad Web Site

<http://www.nps.gov/subjects/ugrr/education/index.htm>

The History Channel's Underground Railroad Web Site

<http://www.historychannel.com/exhibits/undergroundrr/story.html>

Library of Congress African American Odyssey Web Site

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/aahtml/aohome.html>

National Geographic Underground Railroad Simulation Web Site

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/railroad/j1.html>

National Underground Railroad Freedom Center

<http://www.freedomcenter.org>

PBS Underground Railroad-Africans in America Web Site

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p2944.html>

NASA Web Site that explains the meaning of the song Follow the Drinking Gourd

<http://quest.arc.nasa.gov/lrc/special/mlk/gourd2.html>